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Commentary: 'Smoking, caning and delinquency in a secondary modern school': a pioneer study by JW Palmer

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In a paper published in the *British Journal of Preventive and Social Medicine* in 1965, JW Palmer presented findings that may be very dated.[1] The analysis, the interpretation of the data and the conclusions he reached, however, deserve the attention of contemporary researchers in the fields of criminology, criminal justice and epidemiology. Sadly, many of the problems identified by Palmer are still waiting to be solved.

The first question addressed by Palmer was whether caning deters juveniles from (further) smoking. Caning was routine practice in certain British schools at that time. Palmer took advantage of the fact that in a school in South Wales, the headmaster kept a record of boys who were caned for having smoked. Palmer then proceeded to collect (in two waves) self-reported data among students of that school, relating to several behaviours including smoking and some types of delinquent behaviour. He correlated these data with the headmaster's records, to assess whether boys who had been caned since wave 1 reported more or less smoking at wave 2. The self-reported data on smoking were collected in face-to-face interviews by research staff. Today we know that this method is less than ideal—online interviews, for example, offer greater anonymity and thus favour the disclosure of socially undesirable facts. What may appear as a slight methodological flaw in light of modern technological advances in conducting surveys of this kind does not, however, invalidate the conclusions, since the willingness to admit to having smoked or committed minor offences should not be influenced by the experience of caning. (Actually, if caned boys had become more reluctant as a result, this would have produced a conservative bias given the study's conclusions.)

According to Palmer's results, caned boys reported increased smoking. This shows that the headmaster's practice of caning was not random, but a response to his sense of the persistence in 'offending'. Further, most caned boys maintained the habit of smoking at constant levels; in fact, more caned boys increased rather than decreased their consumption of cigarettes. Among boys who did not experience this kind of punishment, smoking decreased rather than increased, an unexpected outcome, which Palmer sees as an effect of early campaigns against smoking that may have raised awareness of the damaging effects of smoking on health. Thus, caning seems to have produced the opposite of a reformative effect.

Palmer is too careful to simply adhere to this interpretation. Indeed, there are methodological concerns regarding the validity of self-reported data on the extent of smoking that have received support through research conducted since Palmer's publication, showing that respondents' indications on having or not offended (or been victimized) are far more valid than their reports on the frequency of such experiences.[2] More recently, it has been shown that indications of the number of incidents experienced are particularly questionable if the number of events increases beyond a threshold of about seven to nine.[3] Beyond such methodological concerns, Palmer considers that caning may indeed have a reformative effect which may, however, be overridden by an age effect, since smoking in general tends to increase with age. This effect of ageing may be even stronger among smokers. Therefore, Palmer does not rule out the possibility that smoking would have increased even more in the absence of caning. Ultimately, he insists that the question cannot be decided on the basis of his data and that an experimental approach might be more conclusive. We will return to this suggestion later in this commentary.

Palmer does not consider a further possibility, namely that boys who learned about the caning of smokers among their fellow students might have been deterred from smoking. Indeed, if caning (or any other punishment) does not

have a reformative effect, there is no reason to rule out an effect of general deterrence. Unfortunately, there is very little research on deterrence and the effects of varying degrees of penal severity, unlike the probability of apprehension and punishment which has been studied more frequently. The obvious reason is that the likelihood of arrest can easily be varied through manipulation of police controls and other forms of social control, whereas punishments, even if they change over time or space, remain far more constant and cannot be easily manipulated for research purposes. Thus, the inconclusiveness of Palmer's study regarding deterrence of smoking through caning is no exception to this general observation.

Palmer also found a correlation between smoking and delinquency. Looking at smoking in its relation to delinquency has gone somewhat out of fashion among criminologists. Quensel noted that there were substantial correlations in German research of this kind at the time of Palmer's study.[4] In the meantime, the obvious candidates for an analysis of this kind are alcohol (of several kinds) and illicit drugs including cannabis. In countless studies, a strong correlation has been found between drinking habits and delinquency, especially when it comes to binge drinking and the consumption of strong spirits that favour loss of control. General drinking is, like smoking in Palmer's time, only weakly correlated with delinquency. This is probably due to the fact that alcohol and tobacco use in general is very widespread and does not differentiate much according to other problem behaviours. More recently, it has been noted that the use of cannabis is strongly related to delinquency, and according to a multi-national study (ISRD-2),[5] it is even more strongly related to delinquency than the consumption of strong spirits and binge drinking. Remarkably, these findings persist in over 30 countries with more than 60 000 interviewed adolescents. In a study in an English and a Swedish town, cannabis use has also been found to be a much better predictor of violence than alcohol use.[6] The reasons may be related to possible disinhibition and increased impulsivity following cannabis use. Unlike other legal and illicit substances, cannabis use has effects that persist over longer periods of time.[7] These neuropsychological effects may favour violent outcomes even days after actual use.

In connection with alcohol, the preferred interpretation among policy makers is to ascribe intoxication (particularly in the form of binge drinking) a causal role in violent events. With cannabis, the dominant view is to see the correlations with delinquency and violence as spurious, since offending often goes along with the consumption of illicit drugs. Indeed, both can be seen as two manifestations of a delinquent (or deviant) life-style. The same interpretation seems to be favoured by Palmer, although he apparently does not rule out any causal link between smoking and delinquency. There is, however, no plausible causal chain from tobacco smoking to delinquency.

More recent research has shed some light on the nature of this relationship. A systematic review of studies from the Campbell Collaboration[8] on the effects of substitution therapies on delinquency has shown this kind of therapy to be highly effective in reducing criminal involvement among treated addicts.[9] Since a few of these studies were randomized controlled trials (RCTs), there is an obvious basis for concluding that dependency on 'hard' drugs (i.e. opiates) is the cause of delinquency. This does not rule out the fact that the onset of delinquency often precedes the consumption of drugs from a biographical perspective, but it means that dependency on opiates (i.e. heroin in most cases) pushes addicts to increase the frequency and the seriousness of offences in order to sustain their continued purchase of drugs. Over the years, survey accounts of offenders and victims have shown that excessive drinking regularly precedes violent events.[10] The causal role of binge drinking and consumption of strong spirits is, therefore, more easily accepted nowadays among social scientists and policy makers. With respect to cannabis, scepticism about the causal role prevails however, in spite of extraordinarily strong correlations between violence and the regular use of cannabis.

Unfortunately, the causal role of consumption of certain substances on undesirable correlates, such as health problems or delinquency, cannot be settled within a reasonable timescale given the impossibility of conducting randomized controlled trials. How could two groups of juveniles be randomly selected, one of which would have to regularly use cannabis, while the control group would need to be kept drug free over a considerable period of time? Beyond important ethical concerns, this kind of research design is simply beyond feasibility. The same was true with smoking and, for the same reason, the debate is likely to continue for many years until, as in the case of tobacco, sufficient numbers of correlational studies succeed in convincing the majority of researchers and policy makers that cannabis use has detrimental effects, not only on health but also on social functioning.

Palmer noted that the effect of caning should ideally be assessed through an RCT. He certainly was right in this recommendation. In a later paper,[11] he presented the outcomes of a brilliantly designed experiment comparing two typical school disciplinary sanctions, namely 'detention' (of 30 min) and 'reprimand' at school for arriving late in the morning. The outcome suggested

that 'detention' produced higher rates of 're-offending' than 'reprimand', but Palmer used it mainly as an illustration of the potential of experimental approaches in the area of sanctions.

Two generations later, we must admit that not much progress has been made in this respect. There are many reasons for this, among them the fact that Palmer must have grossly underestimated the practical difficulties in designing RCTs in this field. However, there are many instances where practical and ethical concerns could easily be set aside.[12] Whether prosecutors should use simplified procedures without hearings rather than following the rules of a fully-fledged trial could, obviously, be tested randomly on its effects on juveniles. Would they be impressed, and in what sense? What would the effects on victims be? Or, to use a different example, would different 'alternative' (i.e. non-custodial) sanctions all have the same effects? In an RCT comparing community service with electronic monitoring, we discovered that the latter is followed by better social integration and less re-offending.[13]

There are no good reasons why such choices could not be tested through RCTs. Many have expressed ethical concerns about this. They would have a point if the sanctions to be tested were socially and or legally unacceptable, as would probably be the case with caning nowadays. Such instances are rare, however. The greater problem is that many untested practices in the field of criminal justice may be harmful, yet we shall never know, given the absence of convincing tests such as RCTs. Since doing harm to people without good reason is unethical, the real ethical challenge in criminal justice is not related to research design based on the random assignment of subjects, but to continued daily use of detrimental sanctions, procedures and practices. Not conducting rigorous evaluations (such as RCTs whenever feasible), but letting soft research design support possibly damaging practices, is the real threat to ethics. It may be time that policy makers and review boards begin to realize this. Palmer's appeal should not be ignored any longer.

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